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SUBJECT: IIP SPEAKER ON ENVIRONMENT MAKES CONNECTIONS IN SYRIA

¶1. SBU SUMMARY: IIP Speaker and climate scientist Dr. Brenda Ekwurzel of the Union of Concerned Scientists visited Syria April 21-25, 2008. Audiences in Damascus and Aleppo, from middle school students to leading scientists, responded positively and enthusiastically to her message of individual and societal environmental responsibility. Press coverage of her visit was uniformly positive. With concern for the environment a cause celeb in Syria, Dr. Ekwurzel's visit enabled Post to connect with a significant segment of Syrian civil society - environmentalists; these groups can be difficult to engage due to government pressure. Sustaining these connections and forging new ones is a Post priority. END SUMMARY.

Connecting with the Public

¶2. [U] Visiting IIP Speaker Dr. Brenda Ekwurzel began her Damascus program with a public lecture on April 21 at the American Cultural Center entitled, "How Our Activities Today Influence the Environment of Tomorrow." A capacity crowd of 100-120 people flocked to the Cultural Center to hear her talk about global warming its effects on the environment, the climate, water resources, demography, and agriculture. She highlighted the role of education, the role of NGOs, and the role of the individual in the effort to protect the planet and its valuable natural resources.

Connecting with Civil Society

¶3. [SBU] To celebrate Earth Day on April 22, the PAO hosted an Earth Day reception in honor of Dr. Ekwurzel. With nearly 70 attendees PD Damascus highlighted American concern for the environment, as well as environmental conservation to a receptive audience. The event provided the Embassy with an important platform to mingle with contacts from both the private and public sectors, and to make new connections with key civil society institutions, universities, and students.

Connecting with Students and Future Leaders

¶4. [U] Dr. Ekwurzel spoke with two school groups during her time in Syria: 115 middle school students and teachers at the Damascus Community School (the "American School" in Damascus) on April 22 and 120 high school students at the ICARDA International School of Aleppo on April 23.

¶5. [U] Following on this youth theme, Dr. Ekwurzel enjoyed a lunch in Damascus on April 22 and a dinner in Aleppo on April 23 with young USG exchange grantees, both alumni from the YES and PLUS programs and upcoming participants in Fulbright programs.

Connecting with Scientists

¶16. [SBU] In Damascus, Dr. Ekwurzel participated in two informal roundtable discussions. The first on April 21 took place at the Orient Center for Studies, the only quasi-independent think tank in Syria. The debate among the 12 participants focused on the environment and ways in which new technologies and human behaviors could positively impact the environment. The second took place on April 22 in partnership with the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Damascus (NIASD) and included water resource experts working in academia and civil society. (Note: due to the nature of U.S.-Syrian relations, professors were more willing to attend an event at NIASD than the American Cultural Center. End Note.)

¶17. [SBU] Dr. Ekwurzel spent all of April 24 at the research facility run by the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) near Aleppo. She toured the research center and spoke both formally and informally with ICARDA scientists -- Syrians and foreigners. Dr. Ekwurzel's formal seminar on "Water and Food Resources: Coping with Climate Change in Arid Lands" drew an audience of 30 scientists from ICARDA and nearby Aleppo University. Dr. Ekwurzel's day at ICARDA contributed to and sustained the positive, cooperative relationship between the U.S. Embassy and ICARDA, which is the only international organization headquartered in Syria. ICARDA is a vehicle by which PD Damascus can engage with university professors who otherwise shy away from contact with the American Embassy.

Connecting with the Press

¶18. [U] On April 20, Dr. Brenda Ekwurzel spoke to a press roundtable with representatives from private weekly and monthly magazines focused on economic and environmental issues. Ekwurzel's engagement with the press resulted in excellent coverage of environmental issues in Syria, as well as U.S. efforts to support the environment here. Privately owned Suria al-Ghad FM radio station aired an interview with her on April 29. The widely-read economic journal "Boursat w'Aswak" ran a full-page story on Dr. Ekwurzel's visit in its April 27 edition. A short article entitled "Caring about Drinking Water Starts from the Sanctuary of Wells" was published in the private, semi-independent daily Al-Watan on April 22. It quoted Dr. Ekwurzel on the need for governmental and non-governmental organizations to cooperate with each other and with the private sector to reduce pollution. "Al-Baladiyaat wal Bii'a" ran a story on Dr. Ekwurzel's visit in its July 1 issue, entitled "We Are all Concerned".

¶19. [SBU] COMMENT: Despite real obstacles to working with civil society, youth, and academia in Syria, Post used Dr. Ekwurzel's visit and common concern for the environment to forge connections with all three groups. Environmentalism will continue to be a theme for PD programming and Post hopes to invite Dr. Ekwurzel back to Syria to celebrate Earth Day 2009.

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